

Summary: The assassination earlier this year of the governor of Punjab is representative of Pakistan's drift towards Islamic orthodoxy and radicalism. Radicalism has permeated society at large – including government institutions – and now represents the dominant worldview in the country. Pakistan's Islamic groups include a wide range of entities, from right-of-center political parties to conservative Islamic clergy and militant groups. The social and educational changes advanced by the government of General Zia ul-Haq in the 1980s has severe implications for Pakistan's domestic security and external relations today, and can only be reversed through a similar generational process involving educational reform, socio-economic development, and regional peace initiatives.

Reversing Pakistan's Drift Toward Radicalism

by Hasan Askari Rizvi

The assassination of Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab province, on January 4, 2011, by an Islamic zealot among his security guards was but one recent manifestation of Pakistan's drift towards Islamic orthodoxy, religious-cultural intolerance, and the use of violence to pursue a self- or group-articulated ultra-Islamic political agenda. In fact, the Islamist worldview – supportive of the Islamization of the polity and, to a certain degree, militant Islamic groups and their roles in Kashmir and Afghanistan – is the dominant worldview in Pakistan. This has long-term implications for the dynamics of the Pakistani state and its society, and how Pakistan relates itself to the international system.

Islamic orthodoxy and radicalism have seeped not only into society at large, but also into the lower echelons of state institutions, including the police and the military. A very large number of people, including those with modern western-style educations, are supportive of variations and aspects of orthodox Islam in national and international issues, viewing everything as a function of religion. Invariably, they are neither familiar with — nor willing to listen to — alternative discourses on national and international affairs.

Some of the people subscribing to this worldview go to the extent of sympathizing with the Taliban and

explaining the continuing spate of suicide attacks and bombings as a reaction to the American presence in Afghanistan and the counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency policies of Pakistan and the United States. Others argue that these attacks are launched by the agents of other powers under the garb of the Taliban because these powers, including the United States, want to destabilize Pakistan. Still others condemn suicide bombings and terrorist attacks in principle but shy away from publicly criticizing the groups engaged in such activities.

Group Dynamics across the Ideological Spectrum

Pakistan's Islamic groups and religious leaders comprise an amorphous entity encompassing right-of-center political parties as well as far-right and Islamist organizations that place a strong emphasis on orthodoxy and conservatism. They include at least three types of political entities. In some cases these diverse sets of groups work together, as during the fierce debate over the proposed blasphemy law, when Taseer's killer was projected as an Islamic hero.

The first group consists of several Islamic political parties that take part in the electoral process, although their electoral performance has generally been poor. Some of these parties



exercised power under the military government of General Zia-ul-Haq in the late 1970s and 1980s or were coalition partners during subsequent years of civilian rule.

Second, there are a large number of ultra-Islamic clergy based in mosques and *madrassas* (Islamic seminaries) who have little or no faith in the electoral process and democracy, although some of these madrassas and mosques are associated with Islamic parties. Several religious scholars have launched Islamic movements that wield considerable influence through teaching and preaching. There has been a proliferation of madrassas from the mid-1980s onwards with funding from General Zia's military government and some Middle Eastern states, such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, and Iran. Madrassa students and followers of the religious scholars are a mainstay of rallies and street agitation.

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Third, there are militant Islamic groups and their break-away factions that use violence and intimidation to pursue their Islamic political and sectarian agendas. The Tehrik-i-Taliban-i-Pakistan (TTP) is one major umbrella group based in the northeastern tribal areas, but there are also a number of smaller groups in the tribal areas that have local agendas. The Pakistani heartland, especially the Punjab, is home to several militant and sectarian groups. Some of these entities operate openly under different names, and senior members of the Punjab government are known for having links with, or sympathies for, specific sectarian groups. In December 2008, the federal government placed restrictions on the Jamaat-ud Dawa (JuD) after the Lashkar-e-Taiba (its affiliate group) was linked to the Mumbai terrorist attacks, and the Punjab government took over JuD schools in Muridke. However, at the operational level,

members and affiliates of Jamaat-ud Dawa have retained a strong foothold in these schools.

Zia's Legacy and Pakistan's Lost Generation

The increased clout of Pakistan's rightwing and Islamist religious groups represents a major reversal from the moderate and tolerant Islamic disposition that characterized Pakistan until the late 1970s. Today, Pakistani society is hampered by religious extremism and cultural intolerance and is more supportive of violence than ever before. This transformation can be attributed to political and security developments going back to the 1980s. The military government of Zia used the state apparatus and its patronage system to appease the conservative Islamic clergy and their supporters in order to build support for his military regime. He also needed these groups to bolster Islamic resistance against the Soviet military that occupied Afghanistan starting in late 1979. The United States was an active partner in this venture by providing financial support and weapons to the resistance movement through Pakistan's premier intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence directorate (ISI). This enabled Islamic hardliners to obtain the financial resources and weapons with which they could pursue their religious-sectarian agendas in Pakistan. In the 1990s, the Pakistan military also used some militant groups to pursue its agenda in Indian-administered Kashmir.

It was during the years of Zia's rule that the state school and college curriculum was changed to accommodate conservative Islamic values, religious orthodoxy, and an emphasis on Islamic identity and pan-Islamism at the expense of notions of Pakistani territorial nationalism and citizenship. The young people were thus socialized into Islamic orthodoxy and militancy through the state education system. The media was also used to promote these values.

The civilian governments that succeeded Zia's rule after his assassination in 1988 were too weak to change the education system and it continued to produce young people with hardline Islamic orientations. The military regime of General Pervez Musharraf (1999-2008) espoused what he described as enlightened moderation but he nonetheless accommodated the Islamic parties when the two major political parties – the liberal-left Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) led by Benazir Bhutto and the center-right Pakistan



Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) led by Nawaz Sharif – opposed him. Despite Musharraf’s commitment to countering Islamic extremism and militancy, he left enough space for these groups to remain very much alive and active. His government, however, made some marginal changes to the school and college curriculum in 2004-2005 to reduce its Islamic content.

As a consequence of Zia’s efforts and his successors’ ineffectiveness, an entire generation that went to schools, colleges, and universities in Pakistan between about 1985 and 2005 has been lost to Islamic orthodoxy and militancy because of the policies of the Pakistani state, particularly the army and ISI establishment. This generation is now in the lower and middle echelons of the private and government sectors, including the military and other security agencies. They have a favorable disposition towards Islamic orthodoxy and militancy, sympathize with various militant groups, and criticize U.S. policies in the region, often describing it as an adversary of Islam. It is therefore not surprising that a large number of lawyers and others, mostly under the age of 40, garlanded the killer of Salman Taseer when he made his first appearance in the court. These people have also been active in the pro-blasphemy law movement spearheaded by the ultra-Islamic clergy, and they have threatened to launch further street protests if Raymond Davis — a U.S. embassy employee arrested in Lahore for the killing of two Pakistanis — is not prosecuted and convicted in Pakistan.

These trends have also been reinforced by the abysmal performance of civilian governments since 2008, both at the federal and provincial levels. The credibility of civilian rulers has been eroded by the faltering economy and by their failure to address socio-economic problems and cope with poverty and underdevelopment. This has alienated the younger generation from the ongoing democratic experiment and has made them vulnerable to the highly religious appeals of the clergy and their allies.

There are compelling counter-narratives to the dominant Islamist worldview. Some moderate religious leaders question interpretations of religious text by orthodox clergy, as well as the methods they use to pursue their agendas. However, such moderates find themselves under siege because the federal and provincial governments are unable to perform their obligatory duty of protecting the citizenry

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from intimidation and violence. Moreover, the Islamists, especially the ultra-Islamic clergy, are unable to sustain the momentum of their agitation beyond a couple of months because there are strong denominational differences amongst them that are often conveniently sidelined because of their shared views on the blasphemy law. As time passes, their differences based on personality and denominational conflicts will almost certainly revive divisions among them. However, such divisions still do not stem Pakistan’s overall drift towards Islamic orthodoxy, militancy, and greater religious and cultural intolerance. Further, these groups will continue to have street power and a proclivity towards resorting to violence that will disrupt civic order and stability.

Implications and Remedies

The military top brass have come to the conclusion that extremist Islamic groups have become a threat to internal stability. However, they believe they have to move cautiously against them because they do not know the extent to which the lowest echelons of the military and other security forces are tainted by Islamic orthodoxy and a hard line disposition. The present civilian government and the military are consequently going to find it a challenge to mobilize popular support for counter-terrorism and counter insurgency efforts. The strong public sympathy for militancy will make it possible for the militant activists, including those affiliated with the Taliban, to melt into urban civilian populations.

The overall disposition of the highly religion-oriented younger generation towards the West, especially the United States, ranges from negative to openly hostile, which also compels the Pakistan government to pursue its relations with the West with caution. The military is going to

find it difficult to extend its security operations to North Waziristan and target all militant groups based in the Punjab in the near future. This could trigger further agitation by the Islamists who want the military to stop all security operations in the tribal areas.

It is a generational process that has brought Pakistan to its present abysmal condition. These trends can only be reversed by another generational process that involves devoting greater attention to human resource development, as well as education and training that encourages a worldview based on religious tolerance and cultural pluralism. Pakistan's state education system, especially at the junior and high school level, needs urgent attention for updating the facilities, increasing the salaries of teachers, and, above all, thoroughly revising the courses of study.

Furthermore, a comprehensive effort is needed for socio-economic development that directly benefits the common people. The faltering economy, power and gas shortages, inflation and price hikes, and declining investment in job-creating industries have hit the poorest sections of the population the hardest. Economic disparities have increased over the years. All this has caused much disillusionment with the political system.

Finally, there is a need to work towards improving India-Pakistan relations, especially resolving the Kashmir problem. Most of the Punjab-based militant groups invoke the nonresolution of the Kashmir problem and the troubled relations with India to support their mobilization. If there are positive developments in bilateral relations between India and Pakistan, these groups will lose their relevance and the government will get space to adopt a tough line towards them. Similarly, peace and stability in Afghanistan will contribute to reducing Islamic extremism in Pakistan.

What is happening in Pakistan today is abnormal. Alternative discourses on Islam and socio-cultural issues are available. However, the skewed socialization and acculturation of the public – particularly the youth – over many years has made Pakistan a hostage to religious extremists. If a serious effort is made by the government and civil society groups, with adequate support from the international community, Pakistan can return to being a pluralistic and tolerant state. But this will undoubtedly be a long and slow process.

About the Author

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